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Reconsideration of the Meanings of the Tribal Ties in the United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi Emirate in Early '90s

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In this report, I would like to discuss the meanings of tribes and tribal ties in the United Arab Emirates, mainly in the Abu Dhabi Emirate in the early '90s. Tribal groups and dignitaries in the Emirates are discussed with reference to newspapers, magazines, and official gazettes as well as interviews conducted by myself between 1991 and 1992 in Abu Dhabi.

1. Reconsidering the meanings of tribes and tribal ties in the modern setting

According to traditional genealogy, tribes are defined as groups who share blood relations. Philip K. Hitti explains tribes by referring to nomadic compounds as “tents composed of a family, and groups of tents, which make *Hai'i*. This *Hai'i* makes a *Qawm* (sub-tribe) or *Qawms*, which share close blood relationships, and unite into a *Qabilah* (tribe), or, members of the sub-tribe share a consciousness of blood relations and this consciousness provides elements to enhance tribal cohesion, even if this consciousness is a fiction.”

Hitti, while emphasizing blood relations, indicates the social aspect of the tribes.¹ When the importance of tribes in the Arab world is discussed, it not only means a memory through blood relations but also has social, political, and economic meanings, which function in the real world.

Tribes residing in what was once called ‘Trucial Oman’ share the legend of Qahtan and ‘Adnan. They believe in the myth that all Arabic tribes are divided into descendants derived from Qahtan, the grandson of Noah and often known as Yamani, who came from Southern Arabia, and descendants derived from ‘Adnan or his grandson Nidhar, who came from Northern Arabia. Rivalry between the Hinawi and Ghafil, starting from the 18th century and involving all the tribes in Trucial Oman, was increased as it proceeded in line with the division between Qahtan and ‘Adnan.² However, such tribal relations were not always stable; all tribes under the Hinawi alliance were not Qahtani and all the Ghafil were not Adnani.

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1 Hitti, Philip K. *Arabu-no Rekishi (History of Arabs)*, Tokyo: Kodan-sha Gakujutsu Bunko, 1982, 84 p.

2 Ya'aribah Dynasty, united tribes in the Trucial Oman, fell into civil war after problems appeared through the succession of its Imam. The youngest son of the Imam of the Bani Hina tribe challenged Muhammad bin Nasser, Tamima of the Bani Ghafil tribe, and this conflict prevailed over the region dividing all the tribes into two groups. Bani Hina tribe of Qahtan organized the Qahtani tribes who share close relations historically and geographically with the Hinawi alliance. The Bani Ghafil tribe organized the Ghafil alliance uniting tribes under Adnani genealogy. This conflict created one of the biggest historical rivalries and conflicts until Persia extended its influence to this region and Al Bu Sa'id Sultanate was established. Heard-Bey, Frauke, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*, London: Longman, 1982, 273-275 pp.

Some of the tribes betrayed their roots and allied with opponents.³ Meanwhile, most of residents in this area still recall that all the tribes were divided into Hinawi and Ghafili.

Nevertheless, this historical tribal alliance has not been maintained in a real and decisive sense in the current era. It is not rare that a tribe under the Hinawi alliance makes important relationships with one once under the Ghafili alliance. The tribal concept of Qahtan or Adnan, Ghafili or Hinawi, does not have much significance in modern society, either politically or economically.

Tribes are described as *Qabilah*, '*Ashirah*, *Qawm*, *Al*, *Fara*', *Beit* and so on. These names were given according to their size in general.⁴ Sometimes a *Qabilah* has a sub-section and sometimes not. It is explained that tribes owned exclusive land, water resources, farms, or fishing rights in the pre-modern age. A clear distinction of tribes was characterized by the *Wasm* (brand) on their camels, and the *Azwa* (war cry),⁵ shared by a particular tribe.

In modern U.A.E., there seem to be more significant elements for developing human relationships than the aforementioned traditional sense of tribes.

Table 1: Hinawi and Ghafili in the United Arab Emirates

	Ghafili	Hinawi
Area	Tribal Name	Tribal Name
Abu Dhabi	–	Bani Yas Awamir Afar Manasir
Shamailiyah	Naqbiin Kunud Najadat	Bani Yas Awamir Afar Manasir
Buraimi	Naim Al Bu Shamis Bani Ka'b Bani Kotob	Dhawahir
Dhank	Bani Kalbain	Bani Ali
East Braimi	Bani Kalaib	
Dhahirah	–	Balush
North Dhahirah	–	Dhawahir Bani Ghafir Ahabab
Yanqul	–	Bani Ali
Dubai	–	Bani Yas Awamir Afar Manasir
Wadi Hattah	Biduwat	
Sharjah	Qawasim	
Ra's al-Khaimah	Qawasim Dahamina	Bani Za'ab Habus

3 Carter, J. R. L. *Tribes in Oman*, London: Peninsular Publishing, 1982, 12 p.

4 Abu al-Hajjaj, Youssef ed., *Dawlat al-'Ashirah al-'Arabiyyah al-Muttahidah*, al-Qāhira: Ma'had al-Buhuth wal-Dirasah al-'Arabiyyah, 1978, 539 p.

5 Sometimes, *Wasm* is not shared all members of tribes and some families use different *Wasm* as seen in case of Duru' tribe. Carter, J. R. L., *Tribes In Oman*, London: Peninsular Publishing, 1982, 34 p.

	Ghafili	Hinawi
Area	Tribal Name	Tribal Name
Hamriyah	All Tribes	–
Hilah	All Tribes	–
Dibbah	All Tribes	–
Ajman	Na'im	–
Daid	Tanaij Mazariah Ghafalah	–
Jili	Tanaij Mazariah Ghafalah	–
Ra's al-Jibal	Dhahuriyin	Shihuh
Unm al-Qaiwain	All Tribes	–
Fujailah	–	Sharqiin

2. Early Days of Abu Dhabi Emirate and its Tribal Society

It is not always true that tribal organization and/or relationship among tribes has been fixed through history. Tribal relationships at Braimi Oasis could be a good example. This oasis is located on the border between the current Abu Dhabi Emirate and the Sultanate of Oman, and has been under strong political influence from Oman. In this oasis, the majority of residents, including Na'im, Al Bu Shamis and Bane Ka'ab were Ghafili.⁶ Their tribal bond in this oasis was traditionally explained as an allegiance to Sultan of Oman or an alliance under the name of Ghafili.⁷ Although the existence of the tribal alliances of Ghafili and Hinawi was significant, they, in fact, maintained independent characteristics and easily rejected traditional relationships in accordance with the ongoing political and economical situation. For example, when the Iraq Oil Company decided to conclude a contract to explore Buraimi Oasis area for oil resources with Sultan of Oman, against the will of Na'im and Al Bu Shamis, these Ghafili tribes distanced themselves and enhanced their relationship with Bani Yas through a young brother of the Emir of Abu Dhabi, Zaid bin Sultan al Nahyan, the former president of U.A.E.⁸ Bani Yas was Hinawi and maintained a strong relationship with the Dhawahir tribe, which was traditionally an archenemy of Na'im and Bani Ka'ab in Buraimi Oasis. Thus, changes in political and economic surroundings brought regroupings among tribes beyond traditional tribal bonds.

The United Kingdom tried to find out the smallest possible political entities in Trucial Oman under their famous 'Divide and Rule' policy.⁹ The U.K. appointed leaders in these entities as rulers. In the area currently called the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom appointed the Nahyan family of the Al Bu Faraha sub-tribe under Bani Yas in Abu Dhabi, the

6 Many consider that Al Bu Shamis is sub-tribe under Na'im tribe.

7 For example, it is explained as allegiance for Sulaiman bin Himyar, Tamima of Bani Ghafir and once self-claimed king of Dhahira in the middle of 20th century, by Na'im and Al Bu Shamis.

8 Wilkinson, John C., *Arabia's Frontiers The Story of Britain's Boundary Drawing in Desert*, London: I.B.Tauris, 1991, 250–253pp

9 Zahlan, Rosemarie Said, *The Origin of the United Arab Emirates*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978, 5 p.

Maktoum family of Al Bu Farasa sub-tribe under Bani Yas in Dubai, and the Qawasim tribe in Sharjah and Ra'as al-Khaimah, as rulers of each Emirate respectively. Among these, it is said that the Abu Dhabi Emirate maintains strong tribal characteristics even after the U.A.E.'s developed economy and society had accepted many foreigners, and gained huge wealth from its oil resources after independence in 1971. As for the Dubai Emirate, since the ruling family was isolated after a series of problems occurred with major tribes in the 1930s, tribal influence has become limited.¹⁰

Abu Dhabi emirate has been maintaining a political and economical coalition led by Bani Yas tribe. The Nahyan family which heads the Bani Yas tribe came from Liwa Oasis to Abu Dhabi Island in the 18th century and succeeded in developing an alliance for pearling and economic ties between the inland and the sea coast. Economically, this alliance made its wealth from businesses utilizing the sea and its gain was invested inland. While some sub-tribes in the Bani Yas alliance offered ships, some offered pilots, and some divers; others engaged in trade and so on when they engaged in fishing and pearling. For example, the Marar, Mahair, and Mahariba mainly worked with diving and piloting. At an inland oasis, Hawamil and Qubaisat defended and managed the assets of the palm trees and camels of the other sub-tribes while they worked at the sea and coast. In addition to that, the Mazari'a and Awamir, as Bedouins in the desert area, offered security and protection for the connecting route between the coast and inland and become military forces when conflict with outsiders occurred. Nahyan families traditionally intervened and mediated once a problem arose among sub-tribes or with outsiders.

Although the Bani Yas tribe was a strong political and economic entity, it is worth questioning whether they are surely tied by true blood relations. For example, the Mahair sub-tribe even now uses a unique dialect of Hinmy and it is sometimes said that they came from Hadhramaut.¹¹ In addition to that, some members of the tribe clearly do not have any blood relation, such as Yousef bin Omeir, the former oil minister of the U.A.E., who originally came from Iran but acquired the name of Mahair through marriage. Probably the belief that they share blood even if it is fiction, which Hitti indicated, has far more importance.

The Bani Yas tribe also developed political and economical relationships with other tribes and made alliances with them. At Buraimi Oasis, Dhawahir managed the asset of palm trees belonging to Bani Yas. Their relations developed into an alliance against Na'im including Al Bu Shamis at this oasis and Awamir under Bani Yas joined in a long conflict against Na'im.¹²

10 ONO, Motohiro, "Merchants and Ruling Families, Tribal Society and its Change in Abu Dhabi and Dubai Emirates," *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies* 10 (1995), 165–168 pp.

11 Heard-Bey, 412–413 pp.

12 Heard-Bey, 38 p.

3. Emirates After the Discovery of Oil

Just before the withdrawal of the U.K. in 1971, the small Abu Dhabi emirate, as a product of the ‘Divide and Rule’ policy, was surrounded by regional super powers, and was forced to become a member of a federation with other small emirates. Even after the creation of the federal government, important political and economic positions in the Abu Dhabi emirate were occupied by Abu Dhabians and the historical division of labor under the tribal alliance was significantly transformed.

First, the Nahyan family, who had been the core of the Bani Yas alliance, occupied positions to govern the Emirate including the head of the state. The *rentier* style of governance by the Nahyan family was enhanced after the first oil shock, which brought wealth to the Emirate and a huge income to the government.

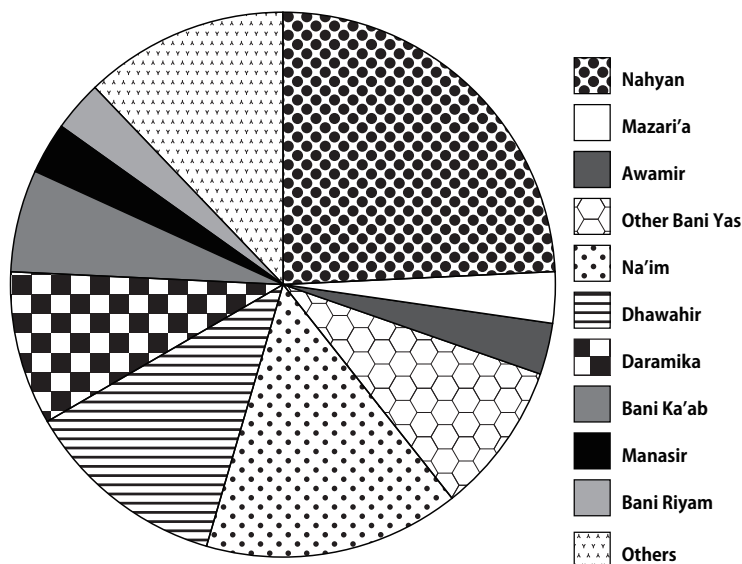
Second, we may see strong traces of traditional tribal alliances in the areas of defense and security. Graph 1 below shows key persons of Abu Dhabi defense and security organizations by tribes. This shows clearly that key persons were not only from ‘big tribes’ but also mainly from tribes which had been traditionally playing significant roles in defense and security from inland or as Bedouins. In this sense, the traditional concept of the division of labor still survives in this field. On the other hand, we may also find new phenomena in the defense and security arena. For example, Nahyan occupies the top position of defense. Also, some tribes who had been enemies of the Bani Yas alliance were employed in significant positions in the military or police and they often occupied positions higher than persons from tribes allied with the Bani Yas tribe.¹³ Namely, the Na’im and Bani Ka’ab tribes, having once been against the Bani Yas alliance and the former president Zaid bin Sultana, created a good relationship with them, and were often put in higher positions than the Dhawahir. This may explain that governance of Nahyan prevails all over the Emirate, not only within the tribal alliance, and the Ruling Family controls the Emirate using its wealth and power rather than the logic of traditional tribal ties. Clearly, the tradition and logic of traditional tribal relations are not as important a factor as they used to be.

Graph 1: Key persons in defense and security organizations in Abu Dhabi by tribes

Thirdly, political organizations are discussed. There are 4 parliament-like ‘councils.’ The highest legislative and administrative organization next to the Emir is the Abu Dhabi Executive Council. Members of the Abu Dhabi Consultative Council and the Al-‘Ain Consultative Council are chosen by the Emir. As of the Federal Council, Abu Dhabi Emirate sent 8 members.

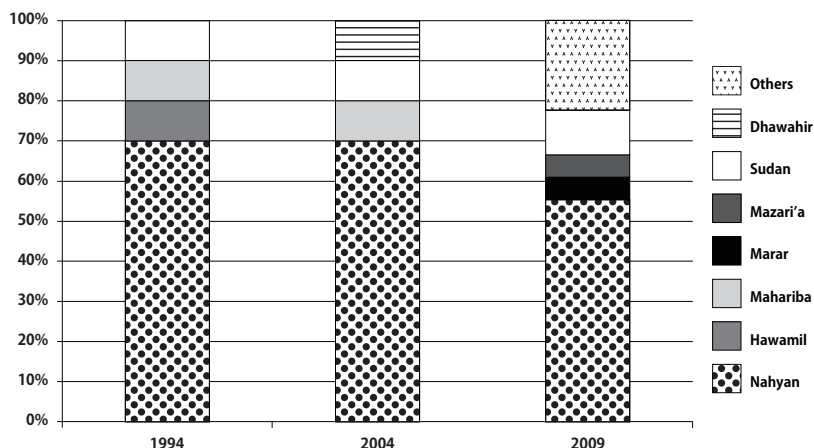
¹³ As of personal names, titles and tribes, refer to table 3 in appendix.

Graph 1: Key persons in defense and security organizations in Abu Dhabi by tribes



The Executive Council is the most important council and functions like the cabinet of the Emirate. More than half of the seats on the Council have been occupied by Nahyan family members. Also members belong to the Bani Yas tribe comprised 90 per cent and 80 per cent of all members in 1994 and 2009 respectively. This shows the composition of the governing class in the Abu Dhabi emirate in addition to the superior power of the Emir. Sons of the former ruler Zaid are recently becoming more influential than other members of the Nahyan family. Although the brothers of Zaid and their descendents had a certain influence over the Emirate by early '90s, their influence significantly decreased after 2000.

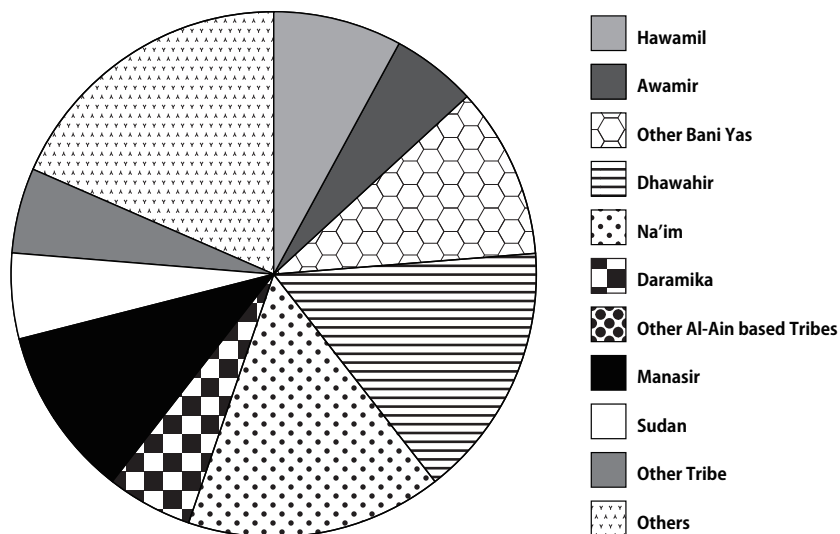
Graph 2: Abu Dhabi Executive Council by tribes



Although the Consultative Councils might not be said to be politically governing classes, the composition of members of the Councils reflects the balance and strength of tribes in Abu Dhabi. No Nahyan members were appointed in the Councils while major tribes were listed in these Consultative Councils. This shows clearly that while the Nahyan family occupies the governing class, major tribes are given opportunities to have a say through these Consultative Councils. Thus, the relationship between the ruling family and the tribes has been changed. Meanwhile, tribes have been given representation and a consultative role.

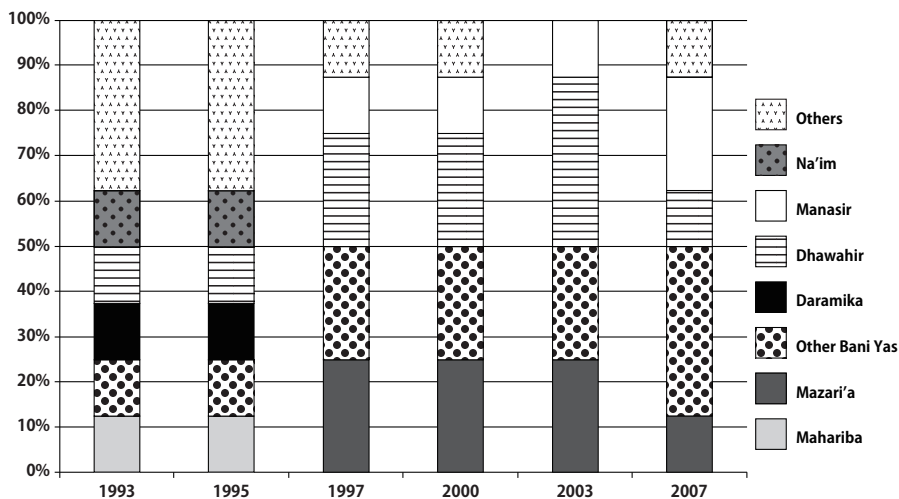
The way that tribes have been given representation is unique. Among members of both councils, a quarter are Bani Yas and not from al-‘Ain, while a third are from major tribes of al-‘Ain. The same number of council members are appointed from Dhawahir and Na’im, probably considering the long rivalry between these two tribes. Also, the same number of seats are given to Manasir and Sudan in the Abu Dhabi Consultative Council. The Manasir tribe has been the biggest tribe in the Emirate and a significant ally with Bani Yas, but its presence in many fields has declined since independence. The Sudan tribe, originally from the Western region, is a rising star since Zaid came to power. It seems that tribal consideration including tribal power balance is significant when the Emir appoints members for these councils.

Graph 3: Abu Dhabi and al-‘Ain Consultative Councils by tribes



No special consideration as to tribe can be found in the appointment of members of the Federal Council, not only from Abu Dhabi but also from other emirates of the U.A.E. although most of the members have been from major tribes. We may say that tribes close to the ruling family have been appointed, but most of the members are still from those tribes even after the introduction of the first election in 2007.¹⁴

Graph 4: Members of the Federal Council from Abu Dhabi Emirate by tribes



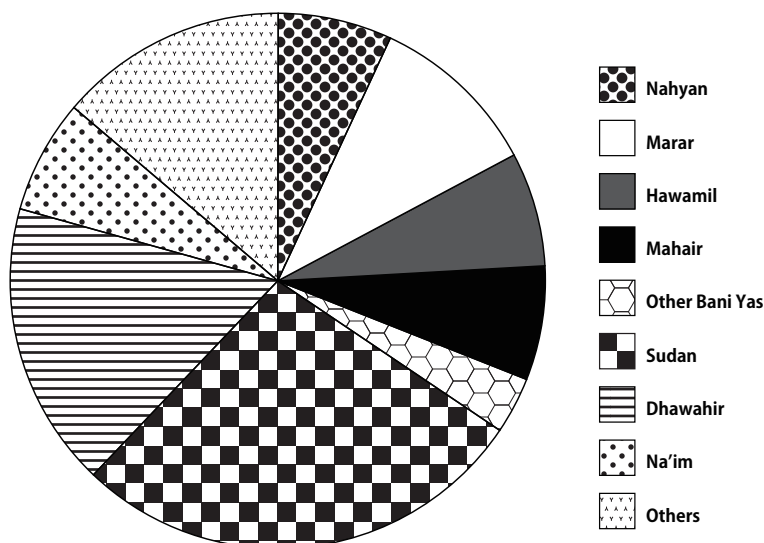
Many significant figures in the oil and energy sector in Abu Dhabi were appointed from major tribes including the Nahyan family, but show the following characteristics. First, more members who are not from major tribes have been appointed when compared to the political and security sectors. Although this sector has strong importance, proportionally less Nahyan members are working in this sector than the political or security sectors. This indicates that education and experience were given higher priorities when appointing leading figures in this sector. Second, more members of tribes from the coast have been appointed than from inland. In general, since it is said that inland tribes are conservative, the chance for 'new industries' might be grabbed by coastal tribes. In these coastal tribes, newly rising tribes like Sudan rather than the old guards in the tribal alliance like Manasir, have more presence in this sector. These characteristics indicate that tribal considerations in this sector are less significant.

14 In this first election, the voters were appointed by Emirs.

Table 2: The Federal Council by tribes of each Emirate

2007								
Abu Dhabi	Dhawahir	Manasir	Qubaisat	Marar	Fahim	Manasir	Mazari'ah	Hawamil
Dubai	Ghurair	Sudan	Marar					
Sharjah	Bani Za'ab	Midfa'	Naqbi'in	Mahair				
Ajman	Matrousi	Matarish	Sudan					
Ra's al-Khaimah	Tanaij	Na'im						
Fujailah								
Umm al-Qaiwain	Qubaisat							
2003								
Abu Dhabi	Dhawahir	Daramikah	Dhawahir	Daramikah	Manasir	Dhawahir	Mazari'ah	Mazari'ah
Dubai	Sudan	Nabudah	Al Nahiyah	Mullah	Dalmuk			
Sharjah	Sudan	Bani Za'ab						
Ajman	Na'im	Mahair	Muwaiji					
Ra's al-Khaimah	Dhawahir	Na'im	Naqbi'in					
Fujailah	Sharqiin							
Umm al-Qaiwain								
2000								
Abu Dhabi	Daramikah	Dhawahir	Manasir	Daramikah	Dhawahir	Mazari'ah	Mazari'ah	
Dubai	Dalmuk	Sudan	Ghurair					
Sharjah	Sudan	Bani Za'ab						
Ajman	Mahair							
Ra's al-Khaimah	Dhawahir	Qawasim	Na'im					
Fujailah	Sharqiin							
Umm al-Qaiwain								
1997								
Abu Dhabi	Mazari'ah	Daramikah	Dhawahir	Manasir	Daramikah	Dhawahir	Mazari'ah	
Dubai	Sudan	Dalmuk						
Sharjah	Bani Za'ab	Na'im						
Ajman	Mahair	Muwaiji						
Ra's al-Khaimah	Na'im	Qawasim						
Fujailah	Sharqiin							
Umm al-Qaiwain								
1995								
Abu Dhabi	Mahariba	Mazari'ah	Dhawahir	Na'im	Marar			
Dubai	Dalmuk	Sudan						
Sharjah	Bani Za'ab							
Ajman	Mahair	Muwaiji						
Ra's al-Khaimah	Shihuh							
Fujailah	Sharqiin							
Umm al-Qaiwain								
1993								
Abu Dhabi	Mahariba	Dhawahir	Mazari'ah	Marar	Na'im			
Dubai	Dalmuk	Sudan						
Sharjah	Bani Za'ab							
Ajman	Mahair	Muwaiji						
Ra's al-Khaimah	Shihuh							
Fujailah	Sharqiin	Na'im						
Umm al-Qaiwain								

Graph 5: Oil sector by tribes



We may conclude this discussion by considering tribes in the Abu Dhabi emirate 20 years after independence by indicating the following points.

- Tribes are still important factors in Abu Dhabi.
- Ties based on economical and political reasons in the modern age are often stronger than historical tribal relations.
- When we observe the tribal composition by sectors, the old tribal order and the new politico-economical logic are balanced, as some sectors put more significance on tribal logic while other sectors put less.
- The power of the ruling family is stronger than before.

There might be an impression that Abu Dhabi emirate remains under old-styled tribal influence, while some may say that tribal factors have been effectively erased in the modern age. Both can be true. Tribal consideration is given in some sectors while pragmatic reason is important in other sectors. The residents know this system. What is significant for us is that we have to carefully examine tribal influence by sectors.